

1: McGee E-5 (1894-1895) 1898 NU31 Seri NU31

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142
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SERI MOTHER AND CHILD

[P. 142 A]

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[177]

Of all the party at Costa Rica in 1894 subchief Maabém was the only one who wore Caucasian apparel with any air of comfort and fitness; yet even he, with hat and shirt, boots and breeches, and loose bandana about his neck in cowboy style (plate XVII), did not feel fully dressed without the slender hair-cord necklace of his kin in its wonted place. On the frontier improvised fig-leaves were sometimes put on the children, of less than a dozen years (as illustrated by the standing infant shown in plate XIV, who was thus dressed hastily for her picture); and a common garb of the smaller children at Costa Rica, as they played about the rancheria or wandered in directions away from the white

[412]

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FIG. 25.—Seri hair-cord.

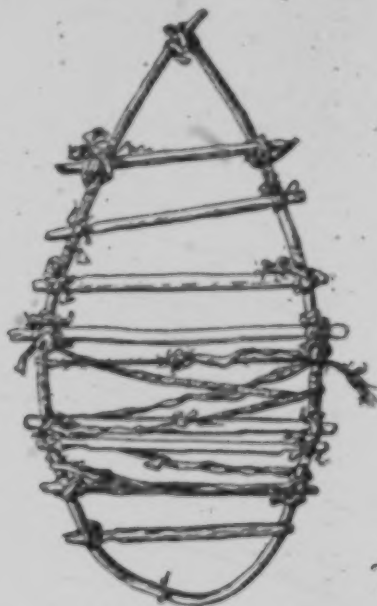


FIG. 26.—Seri cradle.

man's rancho, was limited to a cincture of hair cord or snake skin, or perhaps of agave fiber, under which an improvised kilt might be tucked on the Caucasian's approach.

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In addition to the individual apparel, each clan, or at least the elder-woman or her fraternal executive, accumulates some surplus material as opportunity offers, and this serves as family bedding until occasion arises for converting it to other uses. Of late the prevailing materials are pelican skins, lightly dressed and joined into robes by sinew stitching; deerskins, dried or partially dressed; cormorant skins, treated like those of the pelican; seal skins, usually fragmentary; peccary skins,

281 apparently dried without dressing, together with
 513 skins of rabbits, mountain sheep, antelope, etc,
 usually tattered or torn into fragments. Commonly
 the hides and pelts are nearly or quite in natural
 condition, retaining the hair, fur, or feathers. The
 dressing is apparently limited to scratching and
 gnawing away superfluous flesh, followed by some
 rubbing and greasing; tanning is apparently un-
 known. By far the most abundant of the collective
 possessions are the pelican-skin robes, which form
 [439] the sole article of recognized barter with aliens.
 The aggregate stock accumulated at any time is but
 meager, never too much to be borne on the heads
 and backs of the clan in case of unexpected de-
 camping.

412 Aside from the painting paraphernalia, there is
 302 but a single conspicuous toilet article; this is a hair-
 brush made of yucca fiber bound into cylindrical
 form, as illustrated in figure 29. This article is in
 frequent use; both women and men give much atten-
 tion to brushing their own long and luxurious locks
 and cultivating the hair and scalps of their children,
 the process being regarded as not only directly useful
 but in some measure sacramental. Ordinarily the
 hair is parted in the middle and brushed straight,
 the tresses being permitted to wander at will and
 never braided or bound or restrained by fillets save
 in imitation of Caucasian customs on the frontier;
 though in certain ceremonies the pelage is gathered
 in a lofty knot on the top-head.¹

854 The Seri cradle is merely a bow of palo blanco or
 other switch with rude cross-sticks lashed on, as
 shown in figure 30. On this is laid a small pelican-
 skin robe, with a quantity of pelican down for a
 diaper, and perhaps a few pelican feathers attached
 as plumes to wave over the occupant's face; though
 on the frontier these primitive devices are largely
 replaced by rags.

283 Among the important appurtenances of Seri life
 are the cords used for belts and necklaces, as well as
 for the attachment of ceremonial headdresses, for con-
 verting the kilts into bags, and for numberless minor
 purposes. The finest of these are made from human
 hair; and for this purpose the combings are care-
 fully kept, twisted into strands, and wound on thorns
 or sticks in slender bobbins, such as that illustrated



FIG. 29.—Hair optidia.

is what their "shirt" (McGee, pl. 29) probably was. The fabrics of McGee's Mexican informant may refer to gunny-sacks made over into improvised imitations of civilized garments; or to single-element carrying bags. It is entirely possible that contact with the cloth-weaving tribes of Sonora long ago induced the Seri to shrink from habitual complete nudity; but it is difficult to imagine them producing even a coarse wearable cloth. McGee's interpretation of the historic sequence of Seri garments is of course wholly speculative.

The cradle shown by McGee (p. 226, fig. 30) consists of a kite-shaped hoop with eight sticks tied across it and a lashing thong passed back and forth across it half-a-dozen times. Even allowing for some slip of the parts in transport to Washington, this specimen is quite typical in Seri disregard of evenness, neatness, order, or finish. The Yaqui cradle illustrated by Hrdlička¹ consists of eight or nine lengthwise sticks or canes twined close together. The Lower Californians used a basket or a turtleshell. The Gila Pima and river Yuman cradle is of "ladder" type, and therefore similar in structure to the Seri except that it lacks the point at the bottom and has the sides parallel; it also carries a hood of wickered or twilled splints. As regards basic structure, one form of Maidu cradle is most similar to the Seri; just as the plan of the Yaqui one reappears among Miwok, Yokuts, and Mono a little further south in California.² It appears from this irregular distribution that so simple an apparatus as the open or flat baby-carrier, which can be just as serviceable without a definite technique or style entering into it, is likely to vary locally without much significance, and that its forms will indicate historic connection only when they are parallel in a number of details. In these respects it resembles house types. In both these objects, new "inventions," certainly of detail elements and perhaps of basic structure, seem to be readily made and adopted.

McGee's finding (p. 247) that the Seri are "not habitual stone arrow-makers" has a parallel among the river Yumans, and, at least partially, among the remaining Sonoran tribes. His conclusion (p. 259) that the *yerba de la flecha* (magot, *Sebastiania bilocularis*?) was an Opata but probably not a Seri arrow poison, seems sound. The plant was shown me on the island, and the Seri knew it as venomous, but volunteered nothing as to using it on arrows.

That the question of Seri cannibalism must be left open, with a preponderance of evidence against the practice (p. 263), also seems a conservative judgment.

As to shields, McGee learned of loose pelican pelts and turtleshells (p. 264), I of armor and a large upright shield of hide. Both accounts may be right, one referring to emergency pick-ups, the other to prepared defence or attack.

¹ AA 3, pl. 9, 1904.

² HAE-B 75:535, fig. 42, pls. 39, 40.



142
291
854 ●
302



FIG. 5 (upper left). Maria, wife of Chico, with their baby.

FIG. 7 (lower left). Man, youth, and boy.

FIG. 6 (upper right). Heavier Seri type on beach of Tiburon Island, a bay of El Infernillo in background.

FIG. 8 (lower right). On Punta San Miguel, mainland, mangroves in background.

142
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[301]



FIG. 9 (upper). Seri children showing variety of expressions at camera experiences.

FIG. 10 (lower left). Young woman with sickly baby.

FIG. 11 (lower right). Two girls, the shorter unmarried.

[142]
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FIG. 12. SERI MOTHER AND BABE
 SERI MOTHERS COMMONLY HAVE TOO MUCH MILK AND
 FREQUENTLY RELIEVE THEMSELVES BY SUCKLING AN
 ORPHANED PUPPY OR SOMETIMES EVEN A BABY PIG.

302 ing, and were carried in cane tubes. The
 386 paints were carefully prepared, applied, and
 614 preserved, and, as indispensable feminine
 accompaniments even on the longest jour-
 neys, were among the most highly prized of
 the people's possessions. The importance of
 302 the face-painting custom, established in the
 614 old tribal life, remained strong even as the
 slaughter of the warring tribe progressed

[p. 201(B)]

[92 cont.]

156 They are principally the result of influences that act dur-
 • 854 ing the first years of life: constant contact of the skin with that
 155 of adults; immobilization of the extremities by cloth wrappings;
 provision of a permanent support in the form of a cradle to
 which the child is fastened; constant attention to his alimentary
 needs, and continuous supervision of his actions.

155 "Give me bread," "give me coffee," "you have food, I
 156 am hungry," "why do you keep food?" "that's the way things
 are," etc., are very common expressions that manifest the
 Seri personality.

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On the other hand, from the practical point of view (3),

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3. For the present fishing promoters, the
 Seri personality is a serious obstacle: be-
 cause of the wealth of marine fauna, the
 competent Seri obtain a good catch in a
 few hours, and their earnings permit them
 to live several days, which would be multi-
 plied if the yori would not resort to the sale
 of marijuana at excessive prices to obligate
 them to work.

[276]

it has to be greatly altered, above all in so far as it influences
 the personality, in order to raise the Seri standard of living,
 changing their habits, ideas, and values.

Geographical Distribution

The Seri Indians live in two small Indian villages on the coast of the Gulf of California, State of Sonora, Desemboque and Punta Chueca. From there they frequently go to Isla Tiburón in the Gulf of California. [131] [484]

Approximately 35 Seri families live in Desemboque and 16 in Punta Chueca. Only in the first of these two places are there five "yori" (mestizo) families. [162] [563]

Sanitary Problems

The Seris have no defense against certain diseases which, like measles and flu, they acquire in their relations with the "yoris"; these diseases cause many deaths among the Indians. According to the an- [164] [731] [751]



[291]
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Seri Indian woman of Desemboque, Sonora. Photo Henriette Yurchenco.

cient Seri Chico Romero, last Seri Governor, there was a great smallpox epidemic there about 1897 which caused the death of a third of the tribe which was living in Costa Rica, a small ranch on the coast of Sonora.

In 1955 measles appeared among the Seris, with a great number of victims, children and adults; the actions of the rural teacher Leo Sandoval, the Linguistic Eduardo Mosser and of the sanitation authorities of Hermosillo, succeeded in keeping the mortality rate down; nevertheless, the number of deaths reached 5% of the total native population. [165] [744]

123 handed to show their friendliness.

142 One was a young man with rather pleasant features, his braided
241 hair hanging below his shoulders. His name was Antonio Herrera. The
123 other was a wild-looking specimen called Ramon Blanco. His hair was a
(302) tangled mat with a short braid behind, suspicious black piercing eyes,
long sparse moustache and chin-beard hiding a broad cruel mouth. He
(411) wore the remnants of an old sweater, a short dirty kilt, or skirt,
nearly to his knees, a belt full of cartridges, mostly empty, and a
long knife in a rawhide scabbard.

123 The young man had been baptized and given a name by Roberto, who
(745) had acted as godfather or *patrona*, many years ago. He wore a hat,
(291) jacket, and pants of blue denim, and *guaraches*, or sandals of rawhide.

We shook hands all around and then they called and halloed in the
brush and soon three women and a lot of children, wild and half-
(415) clothed, filed into camp. The women were tall, gaunt, unkempt, ragged
(442) and barefooted, paying us not the slightest notice. They were bearing
(422) on their heads large baskets filled with all their earthly posses-
(450) sions---cooking ollas, scraps of cloth, pieces of turtle meat, bone
(221) brads, hair brushes, and odds and ends. They carried, also, an infant
or two wrapped in odd bits of rags. Several gaunt dogs followed in
their wake.

342 In all, three families came trailing in, removed their household
equipment from their heads and resumed their interrupted and primitive
(571) housekeeping. Each family occupied its apartment in the row of brush
shelters, separated from each other only by brush partitions with a
total lack of privacy. These shelters, always open to the sea, serve
as shade from the fierce rays of the sun, and also as windbreaks, but
are no protection from infrequent rains. They are occupied only for a
(541) brief period and then their nomadic tenants move on to fresh *cahuas*,
or sea turtle range.

123 Soon, a third man arrived while we were near the huts. Manuel
(142) Encina. He was a man of sixty-five, gray hair and moustache, seamed
features, and not evil looking. He was out of breath. He had gone for
water to the same water hole where we had been yesterday, struck our
tracks, had left his water cans and hurried back to warn his people.
He was greatly relieved to find friends.

Since he had gone for water, inquiry revealed there had been no
water in camp for two days, and six adults and one girl of thirteen
and six children were thirsty. We gladly gave them one of our five-
(225) gallon cans of water and they were very grateful. They had caught a
(262) sea turtle the day before and gave us some turtle steaks which looked
like beef or mutton.

312 As the camp was without water and we were running short, the young
402 man and Encina offered to get some. Each took a *palanco*, or short
123 shoulder pole with knotted ends, fitted empty five-gallon cans in

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Santo Blanco and Edward H. Davis -
this hombre gambled away his only
shirt - Suore - 1929



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482
231

Seri method of carrying infant



123 Then Chico Romero and his load of children and dogs arrived and
 484 he unloaded his impedimenta on the beach, and soon the women came walking along the beach and joined the party. The boats carrying the heavy things and children; the women, with their babies and a few light things on their heads, walk along the beach when possible and follow the boats, which hug the shore to avoid the strong currents and tide. The boats are propelled by paddles mostly, though some of the Indians use oars. The women are slightly built, slender and inclined to be gaunt, owing to the hard life and lack of food. Their cheek bones are quite prominent and their profiles present protruding tips.

432 Having no permanent homes, moving hither and thither for their
 [36] various food supply, household things are not accumulated and life is reduced to its very simplest elements and absolute necessities:

Crude baskets made from shoots of the terote tree, vessels in which to cook, and some patched rugs in place of Pelican skins to serve as blankets to the fortunate few, constitute the family possessions. Strange to relate, many of the women have an over-supply of milk, and according to Roberto have puppies nurse what the babies cannot take. One woman was known to nurse a baby pig on one side and a puppy on the other.

[24] Family dogs lick all cooking vessels which is unnecessary as they are thoroughly clean when the Seris are through with them, and also
 [39] lick the infants clean after performing their natural functions, so they are quite indispensable. I saw a Seri girl place on the sand a small can of water for a dog and then saw her drink some of the remainder and pour the rest back in a five-gallon can. Dogs frequently swim across the Infernillo to join their masters.

732 Asked about cripples and incompetents, Roberto said they probably did not exist. The conditions of survival were too precarious to admit of anyone living who was unable, by physical disability, to hunt or fish. There are two or three men who are nearly blind or so. The wives of these men eke an uncertain living for them by the hardest struggle. The sea turtle is the staple; one man and one good boat can secure a living for five families. There are now nine boats, but one boat to a family would practically free them from continual want. With the exception of four bones in the flippers and the bones of the head, all the sea turtle is used--the meat, blood, entrails, shell which furnishes food and oil, skin of flippers which furnishes sandals; sine for strings. Nothing is wasted except contents of the entrails.

123 Again, we laid our blankets on the clean white sand of the shore and were lulled to rest by the murmuring sea.

123 Daylight found us up the next morning; and we breakfasted, rolled
 484 up our blankets, pushed the boats into the sea and were off by the time the sun rose over the mountains and shone over a glassy sea. Two Seris towed their boat by a tump line, while a boy of twelve steered